

What's behind the showdown in the LCMS?

Church and Tradition in collision

By Richard E. Koenig

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH — MISSOURI SYNOD today is a Church in distress amounting to convulsion. Both secular and religious press continue to report extensively on the controversies which wrack the synod. Despite the coverage the average pastor and parishioner, not to mention outsider, remain confused. What is going on? What is really at issue between the so-called "moderates" and "conservatives"? Why is reconciliation or agreement so hard to come by? How did it happen that a church body that once prided itself on unanimity in doctrine and practice finds itself so grievously divided? Such questions usually conclude with an final query, "Can the LCMS find a way out of its present difficulties intact?" There is growing concern, now nearing anxiety, for the synod on the part of members and sympathetic outsiders.

In this series of articles I shall try to supply some answers for the questions which the present crisis has evoked. To do so will require a recounting and analysis of some synodical history. The historical approach reveals that the present crisis is the culmination of a 30-year process rather than the creation of the present and that a resolution without schism of some sort will prove extremely difficult for the synod.

I

At the end of what historian Carl Meyer calls the Middle Period of Missouri Synod history in 1932, the LCMS (known as the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States at the time) numbered around 1.2 million baptized members centered chiefly in the American Middle West. The synod was, of course, overwhelmingly German, many of its members having come to the U.S.A. as immigrants. The successful harvesting of immigrant Germans as a matter of fact was the major reason for the synod's rapid growth which, while spectacular in comparison with its tiny numbers at the beginning, never quite matched the growth rate of the nation as a whole. The synod's blend of classical Lutheran orthodoxy and a type of Christianity deeply interested in religious experience, called Pietism, combined with a

This is the first installment of a three-part analysis of the LCMS controversy by the editor of LUTHERAN FORUM.

flair for practical affairs, made the LCMS a force to be reckoned with. As the 1930s began Lutheranism in America was in the midst of a powerful centripetal current which had begun to run after World War I. The ravages left by the great Predestinarian controversy of the 1880s were still to be seen, but the successful mergers of 1917, 1918 and 1930 which created the United Lutheran Church in America (now part of the Lutheran Church in America), the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the American Lutheran Church (which have since merged again into the body now known by the latter name) seemed to forecast even larger unities to come.

The Missouri Synod was not unaffected by the tide running in favor of Lutheran union. Despite its sociological cohesion, cultural isolation and doctrinal uniformity, Missouri was deeply interested in relationships with other Lutherans. In 1925 a Union Committee established by action of the 1923 convention reported favorable progress on a set of theological theses drawn up with the synods which later formed the American Lutheran Church. Cautious as always, the Missouri convention of 1926 asked that an Examining Committee scrutinize the theses carefully before any final action was taken. With the responsibility of examining the Union Committee's labors, the second committee understandably came forth with suggestions, over two dozen in all. The Union Committee returned the revised theses to the Missouri Synod's convention at River Forest, Ill., in 1929, with the request that they be approved. Much to the disappointment of the Union Committee and others, the Examining Committee reported to the same convention that the revised theses were "hopeless" as a presentation of pure doctrine and recommended that they be rejected. The floor committee which considered the two reports supported the verdict of the Examining Committee proposing that a new try be made on a document expressing agreements with the other side. The theses were turned down by the convention with the result that a favorable moment in the cause of larger Lutheran unity was lost.

A NUMBER OF EXPLANATIONS are available for the Missouri Synod's rejection of the Chicago Theses, as the 1929 document came to be called, including one which places the blame on the rivalry between the Springfield theological seminary and that at St. Louis. Perhaps we do not have to reach that far for the reasons behind the River Forest decision. Among those

displaying little enthusiasm for the document was the Missouri Synod's premier theological leader, the president of the St. Louis seminary, former president of the synod and a member of the floor committee examining the reports of the Union and Examining Committees at River Forest — Franz Pieper. Given its Germanic tradition of almost unquestioning obedience to theological and administrative authority and the fact that Pieper was inclined against the theses, the synod's action is not too surprising. It would have been a complete surprise had the convention voted the other way.

Franz August Otto Pieper was born in Pomerania in 1852 and, after emigrating to the United States, graduated from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1875. At 26 he became one of the youngest professors ever to be called to that theological faculty, the institution where the great C. F. W. Walther, the father of the LCMS, was still teaching. Pieper's call to the chair of dogmatics at St. Louis made him heir apparent to the position which Walther occupied in the synod from its beginnings. When Walther died in 1887, no one was in doubt upon whom his mantle would fall. For a Church already steeped in theological tradition Pieper's position as the synod's leading dogmatist and president inevitably meant that he would wield an extraordinary influence in Missouri until the day of his death in 1931. One of his final acts of service to his Church was *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States*, of which he was the principal author. When in 1932 the synod adopted *A Brief Statement* as its official doctrinal position, it guaranteed Pieper's influence on the LCMS for generations to come.

Pieper and his colleagues composed *A Brief Statement* in response to the 1929 convention's request for a new document to replace the Chicago Theses in union negotiations with the American Lutheran Church. Some scholars like Carl Meyer question whether *A Brief Statement* was adequate for the purpose intended since it did not really answer the specifications of the 1929 resolutions. Nevertheless, *A Brief Statement* is of great significance not only because of its subsequent role in determining Missouri's approach to Lutheran unity but also because of the clarity with which it exhibits what we might term the Pieper Legacy or the Tradition. Even a casual reading of *A Brief Statement* indicates Pieper's central theological concerns. Standing at the very beginning of the document are the paragraphs given over to a strong statement of the doctrine of Holy Scripture asserting their divine inspiration and their infallibility also "in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters." So important had the Holy Scriptures become for Pieper that he frequently sounded as if the doctrine of verbal inspiration rather than justification by faith was the article by which the Church stands or falls. "If faith in John 3, 16 and I John 1, 7 is still found in one who denies the infallible divine authority of the Scripture, that is an inconsistency which at any moment can turn into a damning consistency," he wrote. It goes without saying that a historical-critical approach to the Bible in the modern sense was out of the question for adherents of Pieper's Tradition.

ACCOMPANYING THE HEAVY ACCENT on the nature and authority of the Holy Scriptures, *A Brief Statement* lays great stress on the Church. Beginning with paragraph 24, the document spells out a teaching on the Church which insists on the necessity for a careful discrimination between orthodox and heterodox churches and the repudiation of all forms of unionism, "that is, church fellowship with adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17, 2 John 9, 10; and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17-21." Pieper had developed his position on unionism long before he sat down to draw up *A Brief Statement*. He was already teaching in 1889 that "by the command of God . . . everything is forbidden whereby we strengthen the evil work of the heterodox body. Therefore Christians should under no circumstances become members of heterodox churches. If a Christian finds himself in a place where there is no orthodox church, he must be content with private worship in the home, for God has nowhere given us release from this Word: Romans 16:17." He argued that "the divinely ordained external characteristic of the visible church is its orthodoxy." No more important decision confronted the Christian than the one he made with regard to membership in a Church. A false step there could lead to the destruction of one's soul.

These twin accents on the Holy Scriptures and the absolute necessity for doctrinal orthodoxy in the life of the Church form the core of the Pieper Legacy or the Tradition. Word and Church stood in profound relation to each other and from their interaction arose an authority by which all other doctrines were guaranteed. It hardly needs to be said that Pieper was creating nothing new in his doctrine of the Holy Scriptures or the Church. These two themes were a familiar part of Missouri Synod theological discussion beginning with Walther. But a careful study of Walther and other early Missouri theologians indicates some significant differences in emphasis in comparison with Pieper. Whereas Walther and the founding fathers highlighted justification by faith, attention to this doctrine began to wane in the late 1870s, giving way to a preoccupation with the doctrine of Holy Scripture. Pieper is by no means solely responsible for this development, but his writings to an extraordinary degree reflect where the process ended. (The section on the Holy Scriptures in his *Christian Dogmatics* runs 211 pages; on Justification, 66 pages.) In 1889 Pieper could say, "The first part of Christian righteousness and Christian life is the trusting acceptance of all of the Word of God" — not faith in Christ. One believes in Christ because of his belief in the authority of the Bible: acceptance of the Bible's authority leads to faith in Christ. If this is not what Pieper meant, it is the impression that he left on later generations both from his teaching and his writing. In Pieper's understanding the Bible's authority meant that the Bible was free not only from all error but from all ambiguity or uncertainty. All passages meant what they said, and what they said meant only one thing.

Under the influence of the 17th century dogmatists, the early theologians of the Missouri Synod

understood Christian orthodoxy to include both an affirmation of the truth and a rejection of error. In the Pieper Tradition rejection of error becomes as important as affirmation of truth. The problem with the Chicago Theses was not that they did not affirm the truth but that they left room for a suspicious line of reasoning in the doctrine of predestination. In other words, an orthodox Christian position had to be so tightly drawn that even the way the antitheses to the truth were framed became vitally important. Church fellowship in fact demanded total agreement in *both* theses and antitheses. It was reasoned that any disagreement on what the truth *excluded* might indicate the partners in the discussion were not really united in the truth, and therefore the possibility of church fellowship had to remain in doubt. Climaxing such an understanding of Christian orthodoxy was Pieper's understanding of the perfection and immutability of all Christian doctrine. For Pieper no development, alteration or change in Christian teaching was necessary or possible. The apostolic doctrine formed a complete whole that had only to be learned and then handed on unchanged and intact. The doctrine of the Church was to be received unquestioningly: no divergence in understanding was considered. "Error," of course, had no rights. From Pieper's writings it is obvious that he assumed he and the Missouri Synod were in possession of the truth in all its purity and were passing it on for the benefit of future generations.

THE EFFECT OF THE PIEPER LEGACY on the life of the LCMS was considerable. Stories abound in the oral tradition of American Lutheranism about the Missouri Synod's rigidity and unfeeling application of its orthodox principles. It is not at all uncommon to meet people even today who have had the experience of being denied the Lord's Supper at a Missouri Synod altar because they were members of a Lutheran Church not in fellowship with Missouri, *i.e.*, of a body not in total agreement with Missouri "in the doctrine of the Gospel and all its articles." More often than not the Missouri representative would have a hard time explaining what the difficul-

ties were and why they should exclude one from the Sacrament, but no matter, "close communion" was the rule.

In the treatment of its own members "old Missouri," the Missouri of the Tradition, was equally severe. "Church discipline" was an active subject for pastoral conferences up until very recent times and is still discussed in some quarters of the synod. Pastors were especially watched for indications of heresy or "unionism," sinful fellowship with errorists. Penalties were harsh. The "errorist" could suffer expulsion. In relations with other Lutheran bodies, such as there were, the motto of Missouri seemed to be "separate but simultaneous." Relief work, services to the military, campus ministry and other enterprises were carried out always at a safe distance from the possibly contaminating or compromising influence of other Lutherans and other Christians. The old Latin motto, still found in some seminary syllabi within the last 20 years, "God fill you with a hatred for the Pope," translated into a softer but nonetheless energetic opposition to Roman Catholicism. It was not said too loudly that the Pope was the anti-Christ, but it was taught and believed as part of the Tradition.

On social issues and private morals the Tradition led Missouri Lutherans to predictable and consistently conservative positions. Women's suffrage — in the political process of the State, not the Church — was opposed as a violation of the Order of Creation. Trade unions were looked upon with suspicion. Social Security, life insurance and the taking of interest were considered suspect, if not wrong. The LCMS's press showed a remarkable reluctance to comment on the rise of Nazism and the evils of war. Theatrical productions, films and other art forms were forbidden to many who were raised in the Missouri Synod. (No prohibitions were advanced to oppose the use of alcohol or tobacco, however.) Dancing was absolutely condemned in the most lurid terms. It wasn't until very recently that educational institutions in the LCMS allowed students to hold dances and even now some are holding out.

Perhaps the profoundest impact of the Tradition was the mindset, the attitude — what the Germans call *haltung* — that it engendered in the Missouri



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Synod. One of the most respected theologians of the synod's recent past, Theodore Graebner, commented upon this mindset at length in an essay written toward the end of 1948 under the title, "The Burden of Infallibility." Graebner described the Missouri Synod's desperate need to prove itself correct and consistent on every issue and exclaimed, "There is urgent need of someone who has the time (I don't) of psychoanalyzing the Missouri Synod. How far back does this attitude go and what are the underlying causes?" I believe the cause is bound up with the Tradition itself, a point that Graebner might have been reluctant to concede. We would agree, however, on how the "burden of infallibility" expressed itself:

It is quite evident that there is a theology which claims orthodoxy but which makes of the New Testament a new code of laws. And these laws, being given by divine inspiration, are inflexible and valid not only *semper* but *ad semper*. Operating within this code, synodical resolutions settle problems of exegesis and pastoral theology and in spite of Dr. Pieper's insistence on our freedom to admit error in earlier days, the record is held to be inviolate and positions taken in the past are viewed as constituting one mass of unimpeachable verity. Not only must agreement with the past be uninterrupted and hidebound, it must be maintained in phrasing and terminology and he who so much as quotes the historical record of failure to achieve infallibility may well shrink from courting publicity for his information lest his orthodoxy become suspect. That this is the point of view directing theological discussion in our conferences is a matter of common knowledge.

GRAEBNER WAS SPEAKING from personal experience. He had been mercilessly attacked for daring to challenge Missouri's infallibility complex at several key points. His description reveals the ugly side to orthodoxy, the other side to the Tradition. A passion for truth is tragically susceptible to becoming a passion to be right. Members of the Missouri Synod always knew this and warned against *Lehrgerechtigkeit*, justification by correct doctrine. It is obvious from Graebner's observations that the danger was not always successfully avoided. More than anything else about Missouri, it was the "infallibility complex" which offended and angered both opponents and those who were trying to be friends.

The Missouri Synod was not without its critics, even from the side of orthodox Lutheranism. The eminent John Philipp Koehler, noted church historian of the Wisconsin Synod later excommunicated by that body over differences in doctrine, quotes a remark made by the Wisconsin dogmatist, Adolf Hoenecke, about Missouri: "They have something sectarian about them"; to which Koehler adds:

[I] have come to the conclusion that sectarianism is an air, in the outward manner, that betrays a false mentality, the inward and outward attitude of having things cut and dried, which gives one the sense of self-sufficiency and superiority, and the group so imbued an exclusive character among its fellows. With its rank and file, it leads to a patronizing manner, both in opposition to and in fellowship with others. It is often further determined too by racial or national traits, or contrarily, it may even domineer the more lovable, native traits.

Koehler opposed the tendency he condemned in Missouri throughout his career. When the same kind of attitude arose within the Wisconsin Synod, his opposition cost him his position at the Wauwatosa seminary of that synod, an example of the consequences which could befall opponents of the Tradition.

By virtue of the adoption of *A Brief Statement*, the Pieper legacy became the Tradition of the LCMS at the end of the Middle Period of its existence and it is this Tradition that conservatives are trying to impose on the synod again. There are some who claim that the synod's history exhibits a second tradition alongside the Tradition bequeathed to it by Pieper. This second tradition, it is implied, was more open to other Lutherans and less rigid in its biblical interpretation than Pieper's. Lutheranism as a whole, of course, exhibits more than one tradition, but not the LCMS. Thus, it is more accurate to say that the LCMS seems to have had a good number in its midst at all times who tempered the rigid consequences of the Tradition with love, good will and common sense. Even the most charitably inclined, however, would not have dared question the Tradition on any substantive grounds at any time before 1938, particularly in the doctrine of Holy Scripture. As the synod moved from the Middle to the Modern Period, no one would have guessed that in a few short years following Pieper's death it would be plunged into a 30-year war over the place of the Tradition in determining the direction of the LCMS. In the next installment I shall attempt to describe the way the struggle took shape and what it finally meant for the LCMS in 1969. ■

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What's behind the showdown in the LCMS?

Missouri turns moderate: 1938-65

By Richard E. Koenig

IN THE FIRST INSTALLMENT of this series I tried to describe the main contours of the Missouri Synod's version of Lutheran orthodoxy and its expression in the life of the synod. Missouri's orthodoxy was not so much a doctrinal position consciously assumed and defended as it was a Tradition, a mindset with a host of assumptions and implications that went far beyond any written document. That in itself explains a good deal of the synod's present difficulties. While both conservatives and moderates accept the charter documents of the Lutheran Church and have agreed to "honor and uphold" synodically adopted doctrinal statements, there is no longer any common mind on what the synod's doctrinal position assumes or implies, on what it demands or allows, especially in the area of biblical interpretation. Nor will there be any. Conservatives like President Jacob A. O. Preus want to "get down to the issues," force agreement on the basis of written statements. Since the "issues" involve a mindset, assumptions and implications, all highly subjective and difficult to express, current efforts at "solving" the long standing dispute, particularly in view of the methods being employed, are doomed to failure. No matter how many documents or agreements are produced, conservatives will never be sure that moderates are really of one mind with them. The consensus of the older Tradition has been lost.

II

It all began rather innocently. Lutheranism in the 1930s was obeying the urge toward "increasing unity and increasing union" (Richard C. Wolf's phrase) which had been evident since the early 1920s. Shortly after the formation of the old American Lutheran Church in 1930, the Missouri Synod received an invitation to continue the fellowship discussions with the now Church, broken off after Missouri's rejection of the Chicago Theses in 1929. Missouri accepted the invitation in 1935 and appointed a Committee on Lutheran Union to meet with representatives of the ALC. The committee returned a favorable report to the synod's St. Louis convention of 1938. Discussions with the ALC, the committee said, had revealed a number of divergencies on such issues as the final

conversion of Israel, the physical resurrection of the martyrs and the interpretation of Revelation 20, differences which — the ALC contended quoting Missouri's founding father, C. F. W. Walther — "must not be regarded as a cause for division." The convention apparently felt the same way. Referring to the differences simply as "non-fundamental doctrines" on which the two bodies should endeavor to establish full agreement, the convention decided on a series of steps to bring about full altar and pulpit fellowship. Older differences were felt to be resolved. The ALC had said that it found itself "ready to officially declare itself in doctrinal agreement with the Honorable Synod of Missouri" and to enter into fellowship. Missouri at St. Louis seemed to be saying the same thing.

The 1938 resolutions, as they came to be called, created wide joy and no little amazement in American Lutheranism. One reason for the convention's enthusiastic endorsement of the committee's recommendations was surely the powerful voice of a member of the floor committee, Walter A. Maier, rapidly rising to national prominence as radio speaker for The Lutheran Hour. But Maier seems only to have advocated what the delegates themselves already felt. As Henry Kissinger said last October about peace in Southeast Asia, fellowship with the ALC, it seemed, was "at hand."

Critics inside and outside the Missouri Synod provide the clearest evidence that the 1938 resolutions constitute a watershed in the synod's history. (A good example is "Tract Number 2" issued by the Wisconsin Synod at the time it terminated fellowship with Missouri.) The resolutions do indeed mark a decisive, irrevocable break with essential features of the Pieper Tradition. Under the old Tradition, there could be no church fellowship without full agreement on all points of doctrine despite what Walther may or may not have said at one time. In adopting the 1938 resolutions the synod was certainly not intending a repudiation of all that it had come to be known for. Rather, at St. Louis the synod was simply revising the Tradition in the light of new experience. As long as Missouri remained isolated from other Lutherans and the Tradition was embodied in the form of its revered teacher, its stringent sanctions against fellowship with "heterodox" could be made to work. Once the synod was under new leadership (John W. Behnken was elected president in 1935) and came to know other Lutherans from more sustained exposure as it gradually Americanized, the Tradition became difficult to employ in its apodictic form. At the same time the

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Tradition's influence was so powerful and the memory of Pieper so recent, it could hardly be expected that the synod would take issue with its own past directly. The 1938 resolutions therefore have to be read as much for what they did not say as what was actually resolved. In the light of the ALC's position the resolutions indicate a definite broadening and liberalization on the part of the Missouri Synod. Because the synod had been taught to fear any change, the majority refused to acknowledge that change had in fact occurred. It wasn't until 1967 that Missouri would admit publicly that it had altered its approach and attitude in theology.

BY VIRTUE OF THE 1938 resolutions Missouri elected the moderate course it followed until 1969. After 1938 it was the conservatives who were in opposition against their own Church. The resolutions adopted by the St. Louis convention resulted in an unprecedented protest movement on the part of a segment of the synod against the decisions of the synod itself. Dissenters organized themselves and established a pugnacious monthly publication, *The Confessional Lutheran*, that hammered away incessantly at "abberations" it saw multiplying in the ranks of the synod. While their numbers seem to have been relatively few, the dissidents' influence was out of proportion since their dissent was based on the Tradition in which all members of the synod had been schooled. As conservatives attacked, leadership and synod were thrown on the defensive against their Church's past.

The furor excited by the 1938 resolutions is reflected in the decision to create a new category in the workbook for the 1941 convention at Fort Wayne. Overtures on the convention resolutions of 1938 and related subjects were now classified under "Intersynodical and Doctrinal Matters," a category which the synod had not required until then. At Fort Wayne the synod was forced to assess new developments on the inter-Lutheran scene and deal with the dissent it was now experiencing from its own ranks. After long debate, the convention accepted a floor committee's recommendation that "the immediate objective [in negotiations with the ALC] be not organic union but doctrinal unity" and that for this purpose "one doctrinal statement" be produced to serve as the instrument in discussions between the two churches. The recommendations represent a retreat but by no means a total withdrawal from the decisions of 1938. In retrospect the backing and filling at the 1941 convention appear as the first in a long series of attempts to find common ground where both conservatives and moderates might stand. Like compromises of more recent times, the effort was not too successful.

In the triennium following the 1941 convention the synod witnessed an escalation in the number of contacts with the ALC on the local level and a corresponding increase in the number of protests the more liberal trend evoked. Defenders of the Tradition saw a new threat to the faith of the fathers in the fact that representatives of the synod were engaging in joint prayer at conferences with the ALC. But once again a convention of the Missouri Synod refused to adopt the extreme position which the older Tradition and its conservative proponents dictated. In 1944 at Saginaw,

Mich., the synod resolved: ". . . joint prayer at intersynodical conferences . . . does not militate against the resolution . . . provided such prayer does not imply denial of truth or support of error." From the vehemence with which defenders of the Tradition continued their assaults, it was obvious that they were not convinced. Even the formerly revered Concordia Seminary faculty at St. Louis came under attack. As the rhetoric grew more ugly, a group of 44 prominent pastors and theological professors met in Chicago in September, 1945, to draft and publish their views on the internal conditions of the synod. "A Statement," as their declaration came to be known, appeared in a booklet of essays under the title, *Speaking The Truth In Love*.

Viewed in the context of the Missouri Synod's history from 1938 on, "A Statement" emerges as a document in the mainstream of the synod's development. Its chief address to the synod was on the issue of an alleged "legalism" which "would limit the power of our heritage" and "confine it to man-made traditions." Translated into different terminology, "A Statement," as its critics instantly recognized, added up to a new assault on the Pieper Tradition whose very essence was authoritarian and legalistic. "A Statement" constituted the second major occasion for the synod to come to terms with the Pieper Tradition. The resolutions of 1938 had weakened the synod's stand against church fellowship on any other basis except total uniformity in all matters of doctrine. "A Statement" seconded the thrust begun in 1938 and made some advances of its own by protesting the rigid application of Romans 16:17 (a key Bible passage for Pieper) to non-Missouri Synod Lutherans. In so doing, "A Statement" challenged some of the most cherished assumptions of the Tradition regarding Holy Scripture. None of the 44 entertained the slightest objection against the traditional doctrines of the verbal inspiration of the Bible or its divine authority. Nonetheless, "A Statement's" interpretation of Romans 16:17 nullified Pieper's notion that each Scripture passage was in itself perfectly clear and allowed of only one interpretation. The unanimity and uniformity in interpretation assumed by the Pieper Tradition was no longer present.

FRIGHTENED BY BOTH "A Statement" and the chorus of protests it had called forth from conservatives, the leadership of the synod tried to get the two parties to reconcile their differences. When no agreement was reached, the administration persuaded, or forced, the 44 to withdraw "A Statement" as a basis for discussion, another invention to avoid conflict over the Tradition. Reinforced by increasingly strident voices from sister churches such as the Wisconsin Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (the "Little Norwegians" from whose midst President Jacob A. O. Preus was later to come), conservatives succeeded in influencing the Chicago convention of 1947 to "declare that [the Missouri Synod] is not ready to enter into fellowship with the ALC" and to reaffirm its unwavering loyalty to the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God and *A Brief Statement* as a correct expression of its doctrinal position. Prayer fellowship and selective altar-and-pulpit fellowship which the 44 had been

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accused of promoting were emphatically prohibited.

While "A Statement" no longer was a basis for discussion, much of what the signers had intended continued and even increased. The leadership of synod proceeded with the finalization of a common statement of faith with the ALC and pursued a wide variety of contacts with other Lutherans and Christians in relief activities following World War II, such as the series of theological conferences sponsored at Bad Boll, Germany, for the benefit of both free church and so-called "state church" people. (Recall what the Pieper Tradition said about the support or encouragement of "errorists.") By 1950 the synod was ready to adopt a *Common Confession of Faith* as a "statement of agreement . . . between us and the American Lutheran Church." Against the Wisconsin Synod and the Little Norwegians, the leadership insisted that it was faithfully continuing on the old paths, preserving the Tradition with which it had been entrusted.

The way the Missouri Synod avoided any admission that it had retreated from the absolutist postures of the past played into the hands of dissidents intent on pulling the synod back to its older lines and positions. Following adoption of the *Common Confession* of 1950, the Wisconsin Synod accused Missouri of involvement in what it charged was "a basically untruthful situation." Accordingly, Wisconsin voted to break relations with Missouri in 1953. The Little Norwegians, despite assurances to the contrary, followed Wisconsin's lead in 1955. (Jacob A. O. Preus was both an officer of the Little Norwegians and a member of their Union Committee charged with the responsibility of dealing with the Missouri Synod at the time.)

For a period of time in the 1950s the administration of the synod had the situation fairly well under control. Support for the leadership seemed solid. Dissidents were a disagreeable, highly vocal but relatively small minority. But in February, 1958, a development occurred at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, which precipitated the third, most severe and longest-lasting of the synod's post-1938 crises.

THE OCCASION WAS A faculty meeting at which the Rev. Dr. Martin Scharlemann (Ph.D., Union Theological Seminary, New York), professor of New Testament Interpretation at Concordia, read a paper on "The Inerrancy of Scripture." Scharlemann began his essay with the provocative sentence, "In this paper I propose to defend the paradox that the Book of God's truth contains error." The essay proceeded to discuss problems posed by the nature of Holy Scripture as the Tradition understood it in relation to the Bible's infallibility and inerrancy. In short order Scharlemann presented two other papers of a similarly controversial nature on the form and inspiration of the Bible. In all three compositions, Scharlemann showed both a keen awareness of the Tradition and an expert understanding of modern historical-critical approaches to Scripture study. Scharlemann's basic intention was conservative through and through: he was attempting to adjust the Tradition and come to terms with problems it had long avoided. "By insisting on a Christological principle of interpretation," he wrote, "we can . . . distinguish between [those]

facts [of Holy Scripture] that matter and those that do not." In October, 1960, Scharlemann's colleagues on the St. Louis faculty offered him cautious support with a statement on "The Form and Function of Holy Scripture" while the seminary's administration (President Alfred Fuerbringer) with support of many clergy in the field fought off demands for his removal.

The administration of the synod, however, felt differently. Publication of the Scharlemann essays had called up the third great wave of protest against the administration of the Church from inside its own ranks. New organizations and new publications appeared to defend the Tradition against those who would change it. What later turned out to be the single most important instrument in the conservative reaction of 1969, a crude but effective tabloid newspaper known first as *Lutheran News*, then *Christian News*, began publication from New Haven, Missouri, in the wake of the work of Martin Scharlemann.

Amid cries for discipline and an investigation of the entire seminary faculty, the convention of 1959 at San Francisco reached again for Pieper's *Brief Statement* to reassure conservatives and stop people like Scharlemann from disseminating their views. All pastors, teachers and professors, the convention resolved, were *bound* to teach in harmony with *A Brief Statement* and every statement of a doctrinal nature which the synod adopted (a resolution set aside as unconstitutional in 1962 at Cleveland). As conservatives had long come to recognize, however, even tough talk such as the San Francisco convention's resolutions never quite took the synod back to where it had been. No action was taken to discipline or remove Professor Scharlemann.

Scharlemann was eventually persuaded or pressured to retreat. In a strange scene at Cleveland in 1962 he asked the Church "to forgive these actions of mine which have contributed to the tension in the Church" and then withdrew the essays that had caused the trouble. Scharlemann has repeatedly maintained that withdrawal of the essays did not imply then or now that he repudiated their contents, a point that was not lost on the conservatives. Nevertheless, his retreat at Cleveland represented the third time when a moment of truth for the Missouri Synod was lost. "Echoes of 1521," says historian E. Clifford Nelson, perhaps a bit incharitably, "were not present as the synod . . . voted 653-17 to forgive him." Had Scharlemann stood his ground and defended what he apparently still believes to be the truth, the debate which Missouri is presently experiencing over the question of Biblical interpretation might have taken a different, more positive form.

Despite withdrawal of the essays, Scharlemann's work produced a profound effect upon the synod. The fact that views such as his could be advanced and defended in the synod thoroughly alarmed conservatives and precipitated their decision to take more drastic, political action. Ironically, Scharlemann's morally courageous and theologically able scholarship became the catalyst for the movement that later on was to elect an administration hostile to everything he originally stood for. In the next installment in this series I shall recount the events from the moderates' high water mark at Detroit in 1965 to their defeat and the conservative victory at Denver in 1969.

*What's behind the showdown
in the LCMS?*

Conservative reaction: 1965-69

By Richard E. Koenig

THE MISSOURI SYNOD after 1938 was different. The difference was not to be seen in the area of theological propositions or formal statements at first, but on another level — on the level of assumptions, attitudes and consequences implied in the older Tradition. This is the reason for the passionate conservative opposition to resolutions such as those passed in 1938 paving the way for fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. On the surface the resolutions strike the observer as wholly unexceptional and quite conservative. Those who held to the Pieper Tradition in its original stringency, however, sensed what the resolutions implied. They understood, rightly, that a change in the relationship between Missouri and the ALC meant changes in attitude and approach which eventually would show up in some kind of alteration in Missouri's theology.

The charge has frequently been made that the synodical administrations under Presidents Behnken and Harms were guilty of duplicity in covering over Missouri's development. Moderates consider the charge unfair. In their view the kind of change Missouri underwent and they promoted after 1938 brought the synod closer to, not farther away from the heart and center of Lutheran theology, the Gospel of justification of the sinner by grace for Christ's sake through faith. Moderates, therefore, refused to accept the change = heresy equation that conservatives employed as the touchstone of Pieperian orthodoxy. In the end, no matter how passionately moderates affirmed their acceptance of and loyalty to the basic Lutheran confession, conservatives were determined to return the synod to where it had been before 1938. At the Denver convention of 1969, their efforts met with significant success.

III

To a good many observers, the Cleveland convention of 1962 seemed to constitute a "turning point" for the LCMS. While Professor Martin Scharlemann

of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, was censured for having advocated a type of biblical research that disturbed conservatives in the synod, he was not "disciplined" and a 1959 resolution binding all pastors and teachers to Pieper's *Brief Statement*, aimed at him, was declared unconstitutional. The new administration elected at Cleveland, headed by Dr. Oliver R. Harms, fielded conservative complaints neatly by creating a Commission on Theology and Church Relations to ponder the difficult questions for the Tradition that had turned up in the conservative/moderate debate. With that behind them, delegates adopted enabling resolutions to ease the synod's entry into a new all-Lutheran cooperative agency to replace the National Lutheran Council which the LCMS for years had refused to join. The synod did indeed appear to have turned some kind of corner.

In retrospect such a judgment appears to be correct, especially in view of the action on the *Brief Statement*, but no one at the time seems to have appreciated the determination of conservatives to force the synod to go back to the intersection and turn right. The interval between the Cleveland convention of 1962 and Detroit in 1965 witnessed a marked increase in conservative activity. The old charge that the synod had forsaken its original doctrinal position sounded more frequently. On each occasion the president of synod and his aides, notably Dr. Lawrence Meyer, for a long time perhaps the most influential leader in the LCMS, replied that the synod had not changed, that "error" was not being tolerated. In the face of mounting opposition, the administration continued plans for the synod's participation in the new Lutheran Council in the United States of America and turned aside all calls for draconian measures against the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

Detroit in 1965 in many ways was the culmination of the process begun in 1938 in the direction of greater openness toward other Lutherans and Christians and a more flexible and relaxed attitude on Biblical authority. The synod, after listening to words of caution from past president John W. Behnken, overwhelmingly voted membership in the new Lutheran Council, beginning, so it seemed, a new era in Missouri's history. In addition, the convention adopted a remarkable set of "affirmations" on the mission of the Church that took the synod far beyond the original horizons of the Pieper Tradition. To be sure, at Detroit conservatives for the first time forced the synod to reply to specific questions of Biblical interpretation — an ominous sign — but in the main the answers given were reasonable and restrained. Calls for an "investigation" into Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, were turned down. Both the atmosphere that prevailed and the measures adopted led most observers to believe that Missouri had finally broken free of the strict confines imposed upon it by its older Tradition and was ready to take its place in the mainstream of American Christianity.

BUT CONSERVATIVES saw matters differently. Instead of being demoralized by defections and the rebuffs experienced at Detroit, adherents of the Tradition addressed themselves more vigorously than ever to their cause, taking aim in particular at the synod's

This is the last of three articles on the LCMS controversy by the editor of LUTHERAN FORUM.

next convention in New York in 1967. Shortly before the Detroit convention, a group calling itself "Faith Forward — First Concerns" issued a call to do battle with the "new hermeneutics" which allegedly was on the rise in the synod. The course of action suggested by the group was to "support" the synod's elected leaders in the enforcement of discipline, precisely what the elected leaders wanted to avoid doing, as "Faith Forward — First Concerns" people well understood. The manner in which the "Faith Forward" group "supported" the leadership became apparent in New York. Having failed to persuade the synod to adopt the measures they had advocated since 1941, conservatives after 1965 introduced an unprecedented technique into the life of the LCMS — political action. New York would not find conservatives unprepared and unorganized, delegates uninformed and uninstructed, elections without suitable candidates for office. During the convention conservatives would caucus from time to time to plan strategy and decide what further action to take.

Missouri's tradition was against it, but the modest efforts put forth by conservatives resulted in surprising successes, testimony to the vulnerability of the LCMS convention to manipulation by people determined to gain their objectives. *Christian News* candidly admitted the preparations and crowed, "Seldom in recent years has such a high percentage of true Missourians been elected to responsible positions. This is one of the few times we can recall when so many of those nominated from the floor were actually elected." The "true Missourians," many of them supporters of "Faith Forward — First Concerns," were placed on the ballot and, in a significant number of instances, elected because, as *Christian News* boasted, conservatives "coordinated" their efforts. The coordination also produced some of the most fundamentalistic resolutions on Biblical questions in Missouri's history. In the light of conservative gains, moderate progress at New York toward ALC fellowship meant little. The conservative reaction was gaining momentum.

Flushed with triumph after New York, conservatives urged their followers "to unite their forces in one final attempt to discipline liberal theologians within the synod and elect officials who are courageous theologians, who will administer as an Isaiah and a Jeremiah, and not like weak church politicians," as *Christian News* put it. Apparently conservatives were pointing toward the presidential election of 1969 even before New York despite professions of support for President Harms. At Denver the conservative objectives included replacement of Dr. Harms, rejection of fellowship with the ALC, discipline of all "liberals," and first of all return to the absolutist posture of the old Pieper Tradition.

After an initial period in which he seemed to vacillate, President Harms ended by boldly advertising his endorsement of the change that had come over the synod, fully realizing that in so doing he was challenging conservatives on their most sacred turf. At the end of 1966 he mailed a letter to all pastors and teachers of the synod announcing the publication of an article by Dr. Martin H. Franzmann, the synod's most respected theologian, a New Testament scholar at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, with impeccable

credentials. The article appeared in the January, 1967, *Concordia Theological Monthly* under the title, "On Change in Theology." In his usual elegant style Franzmann stated:

In general it would seem to be true that our theology is today more directly and explicitly "exegetical" than formerly; there is today a larger sense of the historical qualification in both exegesis and dogma; our asseverations are more frequently qualified and our polemics less sweeping than they tended to be in the past; a greater ecumenical openness is so obvious that it hardly needs mentioning.

Franzmann cartooned the change as a "shrinking of the dogmatic hump" and emphatically denied its equivalence to decay. What he saw happening under President Harms was a wholesome and necessary kind of "controlled change" which would not disqualify the LCMS as a confessional-conservative Church. Change, said Franzmann, was as inevitable as history. It was not only inevitable but desirable.

DESIRABLE, INEVITABLE, CONTROLLED as it may have been, change was still anathema to conservatives. Perhaps if the leadership and the synod could have admitted to the shift a little earlier and advocated "controlled change" sooner, the conservative reaction might have been forestalled. At it was, Harm's emergence as a president who favored change precipitated the conservative decision to move against him at Denver. But who should his replacement be? A review of conservative demands as they recur on the pages of *Christian News* indicates what the requirements were for the Isaiah and Jeremiah which the LCMS so desperately needed. He had first and foremost to be a person who affirmed the Tradition heart and soul. In addition, he had to have a killer-instinct, that is, in conservative terminology, the willingness to discipline teachers and officials most clearly at odds with the Tradition even if in line with the synod's development since 1938. That development, thirdly, had to be stopped and replaced with a new isolationism.

Given the familial character of the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, Isaiahs and Jeremiahs of the type being called for by conservatives were hard to find. Few electable officials from inside the synod would relish the job of exiling their brothers or brothers-in-law. Fortunately, or, as conservatives viewed it, providentially, there was a man who met the specifications perfectly. He had grown up outside the Missouri Synod and therefore had few if any ties to inhibit him in the exercise of discipline. Even more important, as a former member of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, once a sister Church of the LCMS, he had served a body which espoused the Pieper tradition in its most rigid form. The man was Jacob A. O. Preus, president of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Ill.

Jacob Preus was born in 1920 in St. Paul, Minn., of a remarkable family, the son of a highly successful businessman, later governor of Minnesota. While the governor appears to have been hesitant about his church affiliations, his theological convictions and piety were thoroughly orthodox. Jacob was baptized in the old Evangelical Lutheran Church, a conservative body of Norwegian ancestry, which later merged with the ALC, but was confirmed at his father's in-

sistence in a Missouri Synod congregation in order to benefit from what the governor believed was more orthodox instruction. In 1937 Jacob entered Luther College (ELC), Decorah, Iowa, and later graduated from Luther Theological Seminary (ELC) in St. Paul, where he served as pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church and taught Greek at Luther Seminary. In 1947, a year after entering the Ministry in the ELC, he left the Church that had schooled him, ordained him and given him his first pastorate "for conscience reasons" and entered the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELS) — the Little Norwegians, as they were called — a minuscule group that had come into being in opposition to the Norwegian merger of 1917 which created the ELC.

What prompted Jacob Preus' decision to leave the ELC for the rigidly orthodox ELS when he did? Preus has never said, but those who knew him then say that no one was surprised that he finally made the break. He had openly talked about the possibility for years. Perhaps Jacob was influenced by the action of his short time earlier while a student at Luther Seminary. In any case, soon Jacob Preus turned on his former church body with the zeal of a typical convert. In a 1948 essay he charged that "the ELC fails to 'continue in the Word' in two respects: first, it does not maintain faithfully the sole authority and perfect clarity of Scripture; second, it does not teach and practice in accordance with God's authoritative and clear Word." The ELC was not the only church body to fall under Preus' condemnation. Despite the fact that the ELS and the LCMS were supposed to be in fellowship, relations between the Little Norwegians and Missouri were less than joyous. Jacob Preus and his brother Robert soon made their voices heard in criticism of the Missouri Synod and its moderate direction. In 1953, after the Missouri Synod had adopted the Common Confession of Faith with the American Lutheran Church (then negotiating merger with the ELC), the ELS's Union Committee, of which Jacob was a member, reported to the convention:

If a change does not take place also with regard to various publicly known unionistic incidents with the Missouri Synod against which we have protested without avail, then we must be ready to do what the Word of God tells us to do under such circumstances.

IT WAS INEVITABLE THAT the fanaticism displayed by the Preus brothers would finally culminate in the kind of scenario played out at the 1955 convention of the ELS. There Jacob moved and Robert seconded a motion that said:

We hereby declare with deepest regret that fellowship relations with the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod are suspended on the basis of Roman 16:17, and that the exercise of such relations cannot be resumed until the offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned have been removed by them in the proper manner. . . .

The motion was of course adopted and relations with the Missouri Synod that had helped bring the ELS into being were suspended.

President John W. Behnken of the LCMS reacted to the resolution of the ELS with shock and anger. "We do not admit the charges. On the contrary, we

emphatically deny them," he told the LCMS, and then went on to describe how the resolution was presented contrary to an agreement that had been worked out a week before the ELS convention. It made no difference. Fellowship with Missouri was terminated completely in 1963.

But some strange things happened in the interim. Both Jacob and Robert Preus attended the ELS convention of 1957. One month later the *Lutheran Witness*, official organ of the LCMS, reported that Robert had accepted a two-year appointment as assistant professor in the department of systematic theology at the LCMS's Concordia Seminary, St. Louis! In the spring of 1958 Jacob Preus also accepted a call to an LCMS institution as assistant professor on the faculty of Concordia Seminary, Springfield. The two men then left the ELS and joined the Missouri Synod. When asked about this second startling change in church affiliation, Jacob Preus told a reporter: "I have made it very clear on many occasions that as the years went on while I was in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, I changed my position relative to the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod." There is no evidence that Jacob ever revealed his change of heart in public or tried to persuade the ELS to adopt a different posture toward Missouri. Later developments seem to prove, however, that while Dr. Preus may have changed church bodies, he did not adopt his new Church's moderate stance. Thus just as the LCMS was struggling to free itself from the Pieper Tradition, it received into its membership two of that Tradition's most intransigent and unrelenting proponents.

Upon the resignation of George Beto as president of Concordia Seminary, Springfield, Jacob Preus was appointed acting president by the school's Board of Control and then later elected permanent president of the LCMS' second major seminary. As a seminary president, Jacob was deeply involved in the fellowship discussions that the synod was conducting with the American Lutheran Church, the negotiations preceding the formation of the Lutheran Council and other areas where the Missouri Synod was beginning to show signs of breaking out of its isolationist past. At first there was little in the way of a public protest against the direction the LCMS was following from either of Missouri's new members. Within the Springfield faculty where Preus was president, however, significant changes were taking place. "At least six faculty members who were moderate in their interpretation of Lutheran Christianity," says newspaper reporter James Adams, "unwillingly left during Dr. Preus's administration because they said he created or tolerated a 'heresy-hunting' atmosphere among the faculty." When he and his brother began to speak out against impending fellowship with the American Lutheran Church prior to 1969, it became clear to conservatives that the leader they were seeking had arrived.

PRECISELY AT WHAT TIME the coalition of conservatives intent on unseating Oliver Harms as president of the LCMS finally decided to promote Jacob Preus as his replacement is difficult to determine. *Christian News* came out explicitly for Preus for the first time on June 23, 1969, in answer, it said, to a "strong

“groundswell” reported by correspondents from the field and “other sources.” (Astonishingly, Preus shortly after Denver joined LCMS district presidents in condemning *Christian News* as “divisive.”) Where the “groundswell” originated, the conservative weekly did not say. There is strong evidence to suggest that Jacob and Robert Preus played a major role in the conservative resurgence between New York in 1967 and Denver in 1969. On September 7, 1970, *Christian News* printed a resolution of “appreciation” attributed to “Balance,” a conservative movement organized prior to the Denver convention for the purpose of defeating Harms and fellowship with the ALC. The resolution read:

WHEREAS many dedicated men gave their time, talent, and energies to the publication of *Balance* prior to the Denver Convention; and

WHEREAS these men should be honored by an expression of appreciation for their dedicated service on behalf of Confessional Lutheranism; and

WHEREAS the many men who have exerted tremendous time, energy, and talents to the organization of Balance, Inc., as a foundation and have contributed to and furthered a Confessional Lutheran position in the face of much adversity ought to be publicly recognized; therefore be it

RESOLVED that Balance, Inc., recognize the efforts of the men who met in Springfield, Illinois, and initially organized the publication: Rev. A. O. Gebauer, Rev. John E. Lutze, Mr. Lawrence Marquardt, Rev. E. J. Otto, and Dr. J. A. O. Preus; and be it further

RESOLVED that Balance, Inc., express its appreciation to the professors and the past president of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, for their contributions and their personal encouragement; and be it further

...

RESOLVED that this present group of Trustees and Officers, under the leadership of Dr. Robert Preus, pledge to remain faithful to the Word of God and the Confessions of our Lutheran Church.

At Denver, Jacob Preus issued a statement disclaiming any participation in movements in support of his candidacy.

Conservative political activity was clearly noted by both President Harms and the LCMS administration, yet Harms would take no action to stop it, partly because his options for doing so were limited, chiefly because his personal style prevented him from moving against his opponents even where he could. At Denver in 1969 conservative campaigning paid off handsomely. The convention took place when both the synod and the nation were deeply disturbed by assaults on the traditional order coming from all quarters of society. Delegates assembled in a mood of apprehension, even fear — fear of the Blacks, fear of “liberals,” fear of change. “Law and Order” appeared an attractive direction even for the Church. Together with conservative politicking, factors such as these produced enough votes to unseat Oliver Harms and elect Jacob Preus, but the synod’s basically moderate character reasserted itself even before the convention adjourned when the LCMS approved fellowship with the ALC, goal of moderate striving for 31 years. There are many who believe that had the vote for president come later in the week, Preus would not have been

elected. As it was, however, conservatives gained their Isaiah and Jeremiah — and Elijah and Samuel to boot. Whether the conservative reaction will proceed for four more years is the question the synod now faces at New Orleans.

CONCLUSION

For many people inside and outside the LCMS, the synod’s struggle between moderates and conservatives has entertained, bored, infuriated, inspired or depressed the observer depending on his point of view or degree of involvement. When one is acquainted with the way the controversy took shape, and what it means for tens of thousands of people and American Lutheranism in the coming decades, perhaps the most appropriate response is one of concerned compassion. Seen in the context of the synod’s history, the struggle was inevitable: sooner or later a Tradition that forbade all change was bound to come into conflict with the change that history inexorably brings about. What was not inevitable, however, was the way the conflict was dealt with and what finally happened. Men cannot blame history for all their difficulties.

We began this series by asking whether the present controversy would split the Missouri Synod. The question is academic: the synod is already divided, divided between those who, like Martin Franzmann, have accepted the “ideal of unity in diversity, after the manner of Ephesians 4” and those who cling to “an earlier more monolithic ideal,” the *Lehreinheit* (doctrinal unity) that will not tolerate the slightest variation.

The question facing the LCMS as it prepares for its New Orleans convention in July, 1973, is whether to accept the fact of its diversity or to try for the old monolithic ideal no matter what the cost. As one who sees himself a bearer of the Tradition, synod president Jacob Preus has clearly indicated what he is ready to do, but neither he nor the conservatives allied with him seem to recognize that their program cannot succeed. Even if Preus were re-elected, an outcome in considerable doubt at the present time, his election would mean the restoration of the old Missouri — the Missouri of doctrinal rigidity, isolation, suspicion of others and fear of itself — on the official level only. The Missouri of the parish in the majority of instances would continue to exhibit the change which the synod underwent and approved after 1938. There would be found the Missouri created by those who passed the 1938 resolutions, who issued “A Statement,” who supported Martin Scharlemann, who defeated efforts at making the *Brief Statement* binding on all pastors and teachers, who drew up the Detroit Mission Affirmations, who helped organize the Lutheran Council, who established fellowship with the ALC, who defended the St. Louis faculty for its responsible Christian scholarship, who supported evangelical progress through controlled change. In a sense Missouri moderates can be said to be paying the price for the Tradition’s excesses. What they have borne in vituperation, abuse and, more recently, exile, in this writer’s opinion will not have been in vain. In the end, as the author told President Preus when first they met in 1962, moderate Missouri will again assert itself and claim the future. ■

What's after the showdown in the LCMS?

Epilogue to New Orleans

By Richard E. Koenig

PRIOR TO THE New Orleans convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod last July, I wrote a series of articles for this journal under the title, "What's Behind the Showdown in the LCMS?" The series attempted to describe the path by which North America's second largest Lutheran Church arrived at the point where theological controversy threatened its very existence. On the basis of correspondence received, it would seem that the story I told can be allowed to stand except for some minor corrections here and there. But what of the future? The "Showdown" series concluded by saying: "Even if [conservative incumbent Jacob] Preus were reelected [as president] . . . his election would mean the restoration of the old Missouri, the Missouri of doctrinal rigidity, isolation, suspicion of others and fear of itself, on the official level only. The Missouri of the parish in the majority of instances would continue to exhibit the change which the synod underwent and approved after 1938."

Events since New Orleans already indicate the accuracy of the prognosis. Crackdowns on deviations in thought and action from the side of the administration are to be observed at many places in the life of the synod and hardliners continue to be installed in positions of power. At the same time, moderates openly protest and issue declarations declaring "errant actions" of the New Orleans convention "null and void." No apparent end is in sight for either activity. But were conservatives to win at New Orleans, the "Showdown" series also predicted, "in the end . . . moderate Missouri will again assert itself and claim the future." It is that forecast I would like now to re-examine in the light of the New Orleans experience.

The weeks following the moderates' defeat at New Orleans saw the spontaneous appearance of a number of analyses describing what went wrong and offering suggestions for the future. The post mortems agreed that moderates had made mistakes and predicted that a long, hard fight lay ahead to recapture the synod from conservative control. The appraisals were unanimous in urging that a beginning be made on the more savvy (political) steps to ensure victory at some point near or far in the future. At the organization meeting of the new moderate structure at Chicago in August, those in attendance were overwhelmingly in favor of fighting in preference to switching to some other Lutheran body

either individually or collectively. The moderates' protest document insisted that "we are not schismatics and will not be responsible for schism." It is hard to tell whether it was anger, fear, a concern for brothers and sisters in jeopardy, a love for the Missouri Synod as Mother Church or a little of all of these that led moderates to choose their path. In any case there seems now to be a widespread desire to do battle with President Preus and his supporters and to regain control of the synod.

Now, the moderates may just possibly pull it off. The organization they began to put together in Chicago in August seems to offer some promise, especially when one examines the leadership. There seems to be a good deal of indignation building in the synod at the tactics being employed by President Preus and his party as they stand revealed in such outrages as the Tietjen case. Pastors and lay people who were formerly indifferent or neutral are finally beginning to stir. A number of observers have begun to question whether conservatives are actually the "vast majority" of the synod's pastors and lay people as they usually claim to be. In actual fact the conservative majority at conventions of the LCMS may very well be a hard core minority positioned on a base of the indifferent, the intimidated, the inert and the ignorant. As time wears on, it could happen that the base would begin to crumble and a new kind of delegate appear at synodical conventions, one who would not be subservient to President Preus and his midwestern bloc. And, finally, there is always the possibility of a change of heart, of a new spirit, which would enable the animosity of the past to be set aside and real dialogue to take place between moderates and conservatives. Such happenings are rare, but one must not foreclose what the Spirit of God is able to accomplish at any time.

WITHOUT WISHING TO FALL into that error or to discount any possibility for an institution which lives contingent with grace, I nevertheless feel that the question ought to be asked whether the moderates *should* try to win the Missouri Synod struggle. I do not mean whether they *could* but whether they should even if victory were an attainable goal. There are, it seems to me, weighty reasons against moderates even making the try.

First, moderates need to take note of the character of their opposition, the nature and mind of the conservatives. An early moderate document issued soon after President Preus took office in 1969 bore the title, "A Call to Openness and Trust." It was a modest pamphlet but

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it expressed some of the moderates' most cherished longings and hopes: the creation of a Church where discussion could take place in a manner congruent with the Gospel. The moderates, so the document indicated, desired a conversation with their conservative partners in which both parties exhibited mutual trust in one another as Lutheran Christians and accepted each other as equals in good faith. Differences within the boundaries of the Lutheran confessional subscription were not only to be tolerated but celebrated. Genuine dialogue would advance the cause of truth to which all were committed, so moderates believed then and believe now. If such an atmosphere was not present in the Church, moderates hoped by issuing the statement they could draw attention to the deficiency and help create a climate that would enable people to deal with the disagreements which were becoming increasingly bitter.

If the New Orleans convention proved anything, it was that Missouri is unwilling, perhaps unable, to carry out any meaningful internal dialogue. Conservatives who were suspicious and fearful during the decades while the moderate movement was growing developed into what Eric Hoffer calls "true believers." (Along with my New Testament, Hoffer's book was the only volume I took with me to New Orleans. I was afraid something like this was happening.) Hoffer, of course, concentrated chiefly on the type of individual who made up some of the great political movements of the recent past, but he makes quite evident his conviction that the same characteristics apply to adherents of certain religious groups as well. The true believers, he says, "[claim] that the ultimate and absolute truth is already embodied in their doctrine and that there is no truth nor certitude outside it." Doctrine in order to be effective "must not be understood, but has to be believed in. We can be absolutely certain only about things we do not understand. A doctrine that is understood is shorn of its strength." Accordingly, "if a doctrine is not unintelligible, it has to be vague; and if neither unintelligible nor vague, it has to be unverifiable." There is, therefore, "an illiterate air about the most literate true believer. He seems to be using words as if he were ignorant of their true meaning. Hence, too, his taste for quibbling, hairsplitting and scholastic tortuousness."

Hoffer says further that the true believers' possession of absolute truth is like "a net of familiarity spread over the whole of eternity. There are no surprises and no unknowns. All questions have already been answered, all decisions made, all eventualities foreseen. The true believer is without wonder and hesitation." Regarding relations with his fellows, Hoffer says "it is the sacred duty of the true believer to be suspicious. He must constantly be on the lookout for saboteurs, spies and traitors." Therefore, "strict orthodoxy is as much the result of mutual suspicion as of ardent faith." It is no wonder then, as Hoffer observes, that the chief enemy for the true believer is the moderate who is prepared to live with mystery and the lack of any ultimate certainty—in Lutheran language, with a theology of the cross rather than a theology of glory. Moderates are the devil the true believer needs in his universe, says Hoffer.

I DO NOT THINK I NEED demonstrate how uncannily

Hoffer's portrait of the true believer fits the present conservative ruling group within the Missouri Synod. One has only to read the convention resolutions from New Orleans for corroboration. Given the development of such a mindset, nothing short of fire from heaven will enable conservatives to change and engage in any meaningful or productive dialogue with the moderates. Victory at New Orleans has whetted the conservative appetite for further restrictions and more purges. Defeat at some future convention would simply serve to fire conservative passions even more. Control of the Missouri Synod in such a case would be like trying to govern in Northern Ireland: moderates would be faced with an unending civil war. Therefore, what the moderates were trying to get at—an open Church freely united under the Gospel—is now permanently out of reach.

One can wring his hands and lament what has happened. One might wish it were not so and deify it. All that will not change matters. Somewhere along the line a majority of Missouri Synod conservatives metamorphosed into true believers (a minority always were) and this development may very well be laid at the moderates' door for failing to communicate early and clearly what they were about. But that is water down the Mississippi now. What matters is that moderates cannot "win" the Missouri Synod struggle any longer in any meaningful sense of winning.

The series of articles mentioned on the previous page, entitled "**What's Behind the Showdown in the LCMS?**", is available in a special 12-page reprint. A new printing of this series has just been completed in response to popular demand. Single copy, 25¢; 10 copies, \$2.00; 100 copies, \$15.00. Send your order with payment to: LUTHERAN FORUM, 155 E. 22nd St., New York, N.Y. 10010.

Second, given the mindset the conservatives now display, moderates need to count the cost of any struggle they set out to wage. One hears on all sides that moderates must now begin to fight, to resort to more hardnosed political tactics in order to fashion the Coming Great Victory. I have always been suspicious about the employment of political tactics in the Church as inevitably corrupting. There is, it seems to me, a basic incongruity between the community which was told "it shall not be so among you" and a group in which the political process is uncritically employed in the transfer of power. If politics is recognized as technique in the sense in which Jacques Ellul discusses the term, politics has a life of its own. It is no longer merely a process by which men order their affairs, but a power which causes them to behave in different ways. One of the ironies of Missouri Synod history is the wholesale adoption of the secular political process on the grounds that "it is simply a method" while at the same time repudiating historical criticism of the Bible because of the unbelief that method allegedly implies.

Be that as it may, at New Orleans it was evident that the Missouri Synod left even politics behind and is now engaged in what von Clausewitz called the final extension of politics—war. Politics, Edmund Burke argued, presupposes the willingness to compromise, to find a way to accommodate one's opponents, to

discover a *modus vivendi* so that both might live together in one society. Accommodation and compromise are denied under conditions of warfare where the objective becomes the destruction of the opponent, his banishment from the system—an exact description of what the conservatives want to do with moderates. Missouri's true believers are beyond politics: they are now engaged in waging the *cherem*, a holy war, a crusade in which the ultimate goal is total victory for their side and unconditional surrender of their opponents.

If Missouri moderates now stand and fight, they would be forced to indulge in activities and tactics that would contradict their nature as Christians who want to live under the Gospel. John Strietelmeier of *Cresset* was right when he said that "the 'soft' Gospel of Jesus Christ forbids us to go for the jugular." In warfare you can't avoid that since going for the jugular is the name of the game. Recent Missouri Synod history is replete with examples that show how far conservatives under Preus are prepared to go to gain their ends. (Who any longer is heard to say, "Why, he wouldn't *dare* do that!"?) We do not have to repeat the stories to underscore the point that when politics is extended into warfare, principles of von Clausewitz rather than Burke apply, and that spells the end of the Christian integrity of the organization. A Christian *may* employ politics without sacrificing his evangelical character. There is no way he can wage war and still claim to serve him who praised the meek and promised the poor in spirit the kingdom of heaven.

I have not mentioned the price such warfare would exact in other ways: the meetings required; the time, money and energies that would have to be expended and dissipated; the distractions such a campaign would create. At a time when the Church's resources, human and monetary, are dwindling rapidly, all-out warfare would be obeisance to anti-Christ. At the Last Judgment some hard questions might be put to people who wasted their substance in such a cause.

WHAT REMAINS FOR the moderates to do? My convictions regarding the inappropriateness of a moderate campaign to recapture the Missouri Synod should not be taken to mean that I advocate either immediate surrender or schism. On the contrary, I am encouraged by the moderates' effort to pull themselves together under such able leadership and resist by all legal and moral means the oppressive policies of the present administration. I wholeheartedly support the move to "identify with and work to give both spiritual and material aid to brothers and sisters who suffer because of repressive acts or intimidations as a result of the convention majority actions." I would like to see a sizable group of prominent Missouri Synod laymen step forward at the present time to let the administration know what the effects of its actions are going to be.

More important, I believe moderates must continue their protest from within the synod for a while purely for the sake of the truth. Moderates are confronted with a classic occasion for confession. When the moment comes for a person to declare the truth as God has given him to understand it, he cannot ask what the pragmatic results might be, whether he is going to win or lose. He says what he has to say and that is the end of the matter. In the Missouri Synod at the present time a distorted

version of the Gospel is officially being promulgated. It demands literal subscription to such biblical stories as the creation account, the experiences of the prophet Jonah and details of the Exodus narrative as part of the Gospel of Christ. This is a new version of the old requirement that St. Paul's opponents defended when they stipulated that circumcision had to accompany justification by faith. Moderates must protest such mixing of Law and Gospel. They must declare that evangelical faith frees one from the dreary necessity of either attacking or defending the "facticity" of the biblical narrative. They have to show that in the last analysis biblical literalism is in many ways a covert form of rationalism that for all its boasting believes less rather than more than its opponents. Moderates have to state frankly that Missouri Synod resolutions and actions raise the question whether the synod really understands what the Gospel is.'

But after the moderates have made their witness and done all they can to protect and support those most vulnerable to Preus and his people, and after they have gathered themselves into a well-knit organization, capable of raising and dispensing sizable sums of money from congregations and individuals, then the time will come for them to move out and form an interim church body of their own. Notice that I said an *interim* church body, for I do not envision it to be one which ought to live beyond a certain point in time. The new Church ought to live only as long as it takes for new united organizational forms to emerge out of what is now the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church and moderate Missourians. The majority of American Lutheranism would then be able to move forward with renewed vigor in performance of its mission as the century draws to a close.

It is an inspiring scenario. It would be a relief for LCMS moderates to be free from the polemic that has blighted the lives of so many individuals and weakened their ministry. It would be a blessing to be separated from the mendacity and the meanness into which the Missouri struggle has debauched. History might be able to show the outline of what happened to the LCMS in future years, but no monograph will ever be able to record the price the Missouri contest has exacted from people on both sides in spiritual and emotional suffering. Everyone was rendered less than he might have been and a whole generation of sons and daughters might turn away from the Church and the faith as a result of the Church taking on the appearance of the worst in American culture at present. Creativity has been stifled. (Take a look at what Concordia Publishing House offers in the way of original theological literature.) Sensitivity and compassion, decency and kindness are tragically rare in a synod which confuses chauvinism with synodical loyalty, propaganda for evangelism and inhumanity for contending for the faith once delivered to the saints.

These are hard sayings and they become even harder when one realizes he has himself been a part of all of it. But in the biblical rhythm grace follows upon judgment, resurrection upon death. It is time to live again. There is before us the task of building something new, of relating God's mercy to a generation that is experiencing the end of the age in more than one sense. The sooner the past is left behind, the quicker moderate Missourians can reassert themselves and claim a different future.

will prevail among Lutherans of all varieties in all regions of the dominion, allowing for resumption of publication of *The National Lutheran* in the immediate future, and full unity among Canadian Lutherans in the next several years. ■

A man of good repute

BISHOP STEFANO MOSHI IS DEAD. The head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania succumbed in mid-August after a long illness. We mourn him.

Occasionally God gives his Church a servant who embodies uniquely the people whom he serves, their history, life and aspirations. Bishop Moshi was such a man. He was, of course, a symbol of the "coming of age" of the Church in Africa, viewed from our European and Western standpoint. But much more than symbol, he was in reality a teacher and pastor, whose people, acting out of their own traditions, instinctively understood to be the father of the family of God in their land. When some Westeners tried to impose an American-style polity on the Tanzanian Church, it firmly insisted on a lifetime episcopacy for its leader, and readily confirmed Bishop Moshi in that role.

Next year the Lutheran World Federation convenes in Dar es Salaam, the "Haven of Peace" which is Tanzania's capital. Bishop Moshi, who was a vice president of the world body, did not live to welcome the Lutheran family to his homeland. But his brotherly spirit will be a continuing legacy to all of us. Like his ancient namesake, he was "full of the Spirit and of wisdom." And he has found, we believe, the Haven of Peace with Jesus at the right hand of God. ■

Modean: honest reporter

RETIREMENT HAS COME, as it must for most of us, to Erik W. Modean. As director of the News Bureau of the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., and before that, of the National Lutheran Council's News Bureau, his words have informed . . . a whole generation of Lutherans about their churches' cooperative work. We were about to say "and inspired" but that's not really appropriate. For Erik has been, intentionally and successfully, an objective newsman. Religion reporters for secular publications have trusted him for honest recital of facts, without rhetoric. That, he believed, was the best service he could render to the Church which he loves. And it was—and is.

As Erik Modean relinquishes his post early this fall, the pen name by which he wrote a column in this magazine for two years seems especially appropriate: "Moses Dean." He has envisioned the promised land of Lutheran unity and worked for it unflaggingly, but in his working career has been denied the full enjoyment of it. We promise you, Erik, that there will still be those of us around who, by God's grace, will continue to attempt the crossing of Jordan. ■

*Post-mortem on the
showdown in the LCMS:
The
issue
was
conscience*

By Richard E. Koenig

NEARLY THREE YEARS HAVE PASSED since I last attempted to write on the Missouri Synod and the historic controversy in which it is engaged. My penultimate word, readers might recall, appeared in the November, 1973, issue of *LUTHERAN FORUM*. There I celebrated the recent formation of Evangelical Lutherans in Mission (ELIM) as a gathering place for moderates after the debacle of the New Orleans convention and advocated their "phased withdrawal" from the synod. The next step then seemed to be the organizing of some kind of "interim Church" which would quickly join forces with one or the other of the major Lutheran bodies to get on with mission. I reasoned that after New Orleans the doctrinal/political struggle had been decided in favor of the conservatives, no matter how thin the conservative majority might have been. Continuation of the fight from within the synod would not only be useless, so it appeared, but actually injurious to moderates who wanted to be what they claimed, *Evangelical Lutherans in mission*. In this article I should like to reflect on the experience of moderates since the first ELIM assembly in 1973 and comment on some of the directions taken. Out of an episode that so far has yielded little that is positive for the Lutheran family a lesson might be gleaned which will be of service for the future.

IT SEEMED LIKE A GOOD IDEA at the time. ELIM's resourceful leadership together with its technical facilities and apparatus would serve to identify and organize moderates, and, when the time was ripe, sound the trumpet for all to leave the synod (I Kings 12:16). I might have known better. Voluntary disassociation from any organization is a difficult step for people to take, even for reasons of conscience. But conscience was what brought ELIM into being in 1973. What was done there reminded me of those scenes in church history, at least as the Missouri Synod taught it to me, where some person or group, having done all that could be done to witness to the truth, deliberately gathered up its belongings to set out on a course of its own to be free. That scenario had the added advantage of making everything clean, clear, definite; I thought ELIM intended to repeat it. When at the second ELIM assembly in 1974 I offered a modest proposal for the construction of a "life raft" organization which moderates were inevitably going to need, I was surprised to find that I was advocating what appeared to the overwhelming majority something quite radical. In the light of the Missouri Synod's own origins, I had a hard time understanding why separation seemed so traumatic for such a large number of people.

In the months following the second ELIM assembly moderates attempted a course that steered the narrows between capitulation and separation. It was described as "in the synod, with the synod but not under the synod." Essentially this direction amounted to a royal indifference to the decrees, prescriptions and proscriptions of the synod majority. Where the structure of the

The author is pastor of Immanuel Church, Amherst, Mass., and a former editor of this magazine. With his congregation he recently transferred membership from the Missouri Synod to the Lutheran Church in America.

synod was still found to be capable of employment by moderates, it was, so moderate leaders advised, to be used. Where the structure got in the way or became oppressive, it should be ignored. The synod's "by-your-leave" simply didn't matter. Moderates, so the ELIM assembly had said, sang and shouted over and over again, were free and intended to remain so. In the heady days of royal indifference anyone who worried over what the synod might yet do or brooded over the identification with her public doctrine which continuing membership implied was told not to place too much emphasis on what was nothing more than a "human organization." Calls for separation were put down in the official moderate press as unwarranted, and privately as politically unwise.

Accompanying the "in, with but not under" posture, moderates also determined on another non-strategy in the light of New Orleans. Borrowing a page from the conservative book, moderates in 1971 and 1973 had attempted to further their cause with a slender political organization, something on the order of a David sling against a Goliath spear. Unfortunately Goliath won and did everything but give the flesh of his opponent to the birds to eat. So it was that ELIM in 1974 determined, while remaining in Missouri, to shun any further political maneuvering. Moderates would go to the Anaheim convention in 1975 naked to their enemies.

"Let's stay in but not fight" was highly popular. On the one hand, it seemed to satisfy consciences because it publicly advertised its defiance of the synod. On the other hand the strategy appealed to the love that moderates still displayed for the Missouri Synod as an extended family. A common moderate assertion was that they were not about to leave the synod since "Missouri is as much our Church as it is theirs—or his!" The received opinion concluded that the opposite course which would separate from the synod was both irresponsible and precipitous. The more moderates voiced their determination to stay, however, the more they succeeded in creating the impression that the synod for them was more than the human arrangement everyone was claiming it to be; it was *the Church*. Not only that, but the only Church where the Gospel was rightly preached and the Sacraments administered according to Christ's command. (Old thought patterns are hard to shake.)

THE DECISION TO HAVE DONE with political *macherei* was a wise one. At the 1971 convention of the LCMS at Milwaukee, I had breakfast with the late Kent Knutson, president of the American Lutheran Church. Charged up by the stand-offs moderates were able to achieve at that convention, I forecast that having held the conservatives at bay in Milwaukee, they would rout them at New Orleans. Dr. Knutson removed the cigar which he had been smoking (at breakfast!) and drawled, "You guys won't beat Jack!" The cigar was returned to its place and the conversation proceeded to other topics.

Knutson was right, as right as Martin Marty was when I phoned him from Denver in 1969, the Saturday evening Preus defeated Oliver Harms for the presidency of the Missouri Synod. "It's all over," Marty said immediately, "all we can do from here on out is fight rear guard battles." He advised me to enjoy the

delicious trout at the Brown Palace where I was staying and compose myself for what lay ahead. Cockeyed optimist that I was trying to be in those days, I wanted to believe that Marty was premature and Knutson wrong. If moderates got it together, worked hard and organized carefully, I thought we had a chance. After all *they* did it. Why couldn't *we*? Besides, we were the good guys with all the smarts. How could we lose? Milwaukee, where moderates had things together much more effectively than at Denver, seemed to indicate that Preus could be beaten.

New Orleans shattered the illusion and proved both Marty and Knutson distressingly accurate. Why? Why was it that they and a good many others, especially on the conservative side, knew all along that the conservatives would stay in power and go on to bulldoze moderates completely out of the way. The answer, it seems to me—although I hate to admit it—lies in the redundant truism that the organized Church is transparently an organization, operating according to the same rules as any other organization. As business people knew quicker than the naive clergy of the Missouri Synod, control of the presidency, especially for a voluntary institution, is the ball game. It would take Preus a while (in his early days he spent a good deal of time quieting down some of his more impatient supporters), but the result was inevitable if not predictable. No one could say how it would all work out, but there was no doubt that things would eventually be brought into line with the president's point of view.

So it was that it was never in the cards for moderates to succeed politically in the Missouri Synod, although I remain convinced that the attempt had to be made if for no other reason than to allow the issue of conscience to emerge more clear and unalloyed. The synod was and is conservative in just enough ways and degrees to provide its relentless and ruthless leadership all the votes it needs to achieve its ends. Those ends, as some of the people on the right are beginning to realize, are not to purge Missouri of all doctrinal impurity but to exercise control and ensure the public, official purity of Missouri, despite what individuals might be saying or doing at other levels. As long as no official challenge is mounted, the conservative leadership is not about to pursue the culprits no matter how many "concerned" laymen and clergy yell "copper" or how many exposés are printed in the wretched publications that vigilantes now proliferate in all quarters of the synod. It is possible, of course, that the administration still considers itself in the mopping-up stage and will get around to the smaller fry later on. I rather doubt it. Why muck up things more than you have to, especially when dissenters have been cowed into silence and matters can be manipulated to whatever end is desired?

IT WAS AT ANAHEIM where, in spite of itself, the moderate movement was forced to turn left, for it was there that the district presidents who had defied the synod by ordaining and placing graduates of Concordia Seminary-in-Exile were made liable to removal if they persisted. The convention was a leaden affair at which the only surprise was the persistent size of the moderate minority (40-45 percent) on the key issues, even without politicking or organizing. Everything the conservatives

wanted they got, including the final binding and gagging of the moderate minority in the condemnation of ELIM. Anaheim proved, if it had to be proved to anyone, that if moderates remained with the Missouri Synod, they would do so only as a condemned minority, voiceless and impotent in the councils of the synod. There was not a token, not a gesture, to indicate that conservatives accorded the moderates even the slightest recognition as persons of integrity or courage, or as brothers and sisters in the fellowship of the Missouri Synod. Anaheim exposed the hypocrisy of all Preus' rhetoric on reconciliation. More important, the convention's action showed that "in the synod, with the synod but not under the synod" was not going to work. Both psychologically and operationally, the heat was on.

Pressure on the district presidents over the ordination and placement of Seminex graduates forced moderates into a new stance. Those who supported the threatened presidents had to consider what was to be done if they were ousted, which many fondly hoped would not happen even after the adoption of the infamous resolution 5-02A of Anaheim. Removal, it was gradually becoming clear, would place both the president and his supporters in an anomalous and eventually untenable position with reference to the synod. Distasteful as it might be, the prospect of separation had to be faced.

Anaheim was the reason for the changed tone of ELIM's third assembly in August, 1975. Whereas the moderate movement previously had been reluctant even to consider the topic, now the assembly both endorsed a first attempt at forming a new church body and adopted a process by which others could move along the same line. If separation was to occur, however, moderates who were willing to entertain the thought were agreed that the rupture had to come about "not by our choice." In other words, moderates after Anaheim doggedly held on to their place in the synod, demanding to be forced out in preference to any unilateral decision to leave.

I never was at ease with the "not by our choice" approach. Its wholesale acceptance by the movement looked to make things more, not less, difficult for moderates when the time came to face the administration's implementation of Anaheim's sanctions against the presidents, because it neutralized the role of conscience. For a while my distrust of the synodical administration led me to believe that no move would be made against the presidents even after the convention put the axe in Preus' hands (at his request). Following the cynical exemption of the first presidents to become liable to removal, I was even more convinced that Preus was out on another campaign to cow the synod without employing any overt force. Along with many others, including some of the most careful observers of the synodical scene, I was surprised by the April Fool massacre in which four of the eight dissident district presidents were given their walking papers and "acting presidents" appointed in their places.

According to the most widely accepted moderate scenario, removal of the presidents was to be the final "trip wire" setting into motion the largest scale secession that could be envisioned for a group so reluctant to move. As it is turning out, however, Preus's clever action against the presidents once again softened

Here We Stand



Above, The Rev. Dr. Oliver Harms, former president of the Missouri Synod, addresses the 1974 ELIM assembly in Chicago.

the blow, and his temporizing while the deposed presidents "continued" in office lessened the impact even more. The result is that, 14 months after Anaheim, congregations and pastors who supported the presidents along with moderates throughout the country are still making up their minds what to do. To put it another way, the "not by our choice" adherents are now having to choose. Once again, they have been denied the sight of that one monumental outrage which would remove any necessity for decision. A truly modern church body, you see, does not employ such crude methods for the disposing of dissidents. The accepted procedure now is the way of neutralization and theological castration by managerial techniques and bureaucratic "rulings." The dissident does not even know that he has been liquidated. Neither does the Church.

WHATEVER THE PRAGMATIC VALUE of the "not by our choice" approach, the fact that moderates are having to choose anyhow means that the issue has returned to the point where it began: with the question of conscience and that means the question of truth. In a long conversation with Richard Neuhaus in the fall of 1975, we debated the claims of conscience in the matter of separation from Missouri. Neuhaus argued that for the truly catholic Christian, which he hoped Missouri Lutherans wanted to be, the unity of the Church was to be affirmed above all else. In his view Missouri's flirtation with fundamentalism might be a passing excess, something the process of history could temper.

To leave Missouri by one's own choice would constitute a denial of the churchly character that Missouri still retained by virtue of her adherence to the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran confessions. Worse, such unilateral action would prove the secessionist's bondage to old Missouri's separatism and its overly intellectualized conception of dogma.

Neuhaus might be changing his mind these days. My reply to him back in November was that his argument omitted another crucial element in catholic Christianity; namely, the question of truth. Both unity and truth, as Franklin Clark Fry never tired of saying, are essential to the Church and dare not be played off against each other. As I understand it, one has to decide from one historical moment to another which takes precedence. For people in the Missouri Synod, I argued, Jacob Preus's *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, adopted as binding doctrine by majority vote at New Orleans in 1973, had put them to the wall. No matter how sleazy the political machinations by which the document became binding, or how wrong in principle its adoption might be, the fact was that *A Statement* was now there and had to be answered.

Such is the result of decision making by franchise which American denominations have taken over from the model of the national government. Perhaps it should not be so among us, but a majority vote has a peculiar and terrible power for churches in the land of the free and the home of the brave. For better and for worse, the decision by the majority in a democratic society is the decision of all and all are associated with it whether in agreement or not. That is why votes on doctrine at church conventions have such extraordinary importance and almost need no machinery to enforce them.



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Lutherans outside of Missouri have taken a dim view of *A Statement*. David Preus, president of the American Lutheran Church, sees it as the source of Missouri's problems, a narrow version of Lutheranism at best. Taking issue with some of *A Statement's* assertions, Robert Marshall, president of the Lutheran Church in America, plainly sees it inadequate as a guiding standard. The criticisms, however, stop short of condemning *A Statement* for the threat it poses to a sound comprehension of the Gospel and its effective communication to the world.

The novelty of *A Statement* lies in the preeminence (itself an error) given to the "facticity," the "historicity," the "factuality" of "matters recorded in the Bible." For the most part the "matters" referred to are historical narratives, but in other sections *A Statement* clearly indicates that other "teachings of Scripture" are included such as the various kinds and ranks of angels, customs of the early Church and the like. In its insistence on "facticity," *A Statement* reveals its wholesale subjection to the spirit and thought forms of the age and thereby its inadequacy as means for stating Christian truth. Employing the research of Owen Barfield (*Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*), Charles Davis comments on the fundamentalist's insistence on facticity and the concomitant lust for certitude:

Barfield argues, that both the literal and the consciously metaphorical are derivative senses, coming later in the evolution of consciousness and language. The common opinion that words originally had merely a plain literal sense, referring to physical objects and events, and then that sense was extended by conscious metaphor to invisible and spiritual realities is an assumption unsupported by the data and due to the philosophical prejudice. . . .

From this standpoint, reactive literalism . . . is an attempt to cramp the figurative language of the Bible into the narrow framework of interpretation appropriate only to the literal usage of modern science. Admittedly, the language of empirical science has had a considerable impact upon ordinary language, so that much modern speech is denuded of any but empirical meaning and shares the literalness of scientific language. That is why the modern Bible reader is tempted to take a literal or factual interpretation as basic and normative for every text, except the obviously poetic. But this is to distort the meaning of the Bible by reading it in an anachronistic manner.

Neither Barfield nor Davis is denying the events of salvation history, but they assert, as *A Statement* does not, that they are couched in such a way that saving significance takes precedence over facticity.

SECOND, IT IS CLEAR THAT *A Statement* is not merely propounding a specific set of assertions as the truth, but a particular conception of truth itself as the sole equivalent of orthodoxy. Is *A Statement* correct in this? While Jacob and Robert Preus were still busy polemicizing against the old Evangelical Lutheran Church as members of the "little Norwegian" Synod, ex-Missourian Jaroslav Pelikan was teaching the Missouri Synod in the early '50s:

Truth came in Christ, this was its locus. A second insight that Paul had into the truth in Christ was that it came as faithfulness. . . . Applied specifically to God, it meant that God did not lie when He promised mercy. . . . Truth, then, was not a given collection of statements that somehow corresponded to external reality. It was God Himself being trustworthy, merciful, faithful. And faith was not the intellectual assent that this collection of statements did indeed correspond to that external reality and was therefore "true." It was the obedient reliance upon the God and Father of

our Lord Jesus Christ, believing "in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification."

If Davis and Pelikan are correct, as I believe they are, then *A Statement* constitutes a grievous distortion of Christian truth, dangerous as a view to be propounded in our churches or taught to our children and almost useless as a means for the liberation of people caught in the bondage of sin. In short, *A Statement* ought to be tolerated in the Church of God only for purposes of discussion, nothing more.

Now, admittedly a critique of *A Statement* based on such reasoning will not play well in Peoria or convince many in Dubuque—or in Boston or San Diego for that matter. The arguments are subtle—as is the error. Were *A Statement* put forth as one man's view of Lutheranism, which it is, we might be able to tolerate it, narrow as it is in its conception, pretentious in style, lacking in evangelical tone and spirit and totally incomprehensible as a vehicle of communication. But when, by the power of majority vote, its tortured paragraphs become the only acceptable version of Christian orthodoxy, then it demands rejection as a violation of conscience. As someone in Lutheran history said, "To go against conscience is neither right nor safe."

These are days of decision for moderates in the Missouri Synod. For pastors and congregations there will be many important factors to be taken into consideration before a verdict can be reached to leave the synod or not. Most weighty of all is the question of conscience, and its corollaries, truth, integrity and freedom. As this is being written, moderates are attempting to establish a new church body called the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). Under the best of circumstances the new association will have a hard time of it, if for no other reason than the economy. Yet so long as moderates keep the questions of truth and conscience foremost, the right decisions will be made and the new association will be a success as I pray it will be, no matter what its numbers may be. The task of the new church body is to demonstrate that there is a necessary distinction to be drawn between confessional Lutheranism and orthodoxy. For too long Missouri has been allowed to give the impression that the two are identical when they are not, particularly when orthodoxy is defined the Missouri way.

After conscience, the success of the AELC will be largely dependent on the quality of its leadership, the theological adequacy of its confession and, most important, the degree to which lay persons are involved in its formation. For myself the question of conscience led to a decision to quit Missouri when it became evident that Anaheim was not going to redress the crimes of New Orleans. When I shared the course I believed I had to take with the congregation, I was surprised to discover that, once we began to think of separation together, the lay people were decidedly cool toward the idea of a new structure for moderates, at least in our area. They preferred instead one of the existing Lutheran churches, a genuinely "catholic" sentiment if there ever was one. Local circumstances will no doubt continue to play a strong rôle in determining which course is best for individual pastors and congregations to pursue. Whatever the immediate

outcome of the deliberations may be, in the longer run people seem to be looking for the realization of the long-sought goal of Lutheran union in North America. AELC has to take care not to live for its own sake or, what would be worse, simply as an Anti-Missourian Brotherhood. If that were to happen, the last state of the moderates would be worse than the first.

No ONE AT THIS TIME really knows what the final outcome of Missouri's agony will be in terms of congregations and pastors leaving the synod, but for the first time in my life, I agree with Jacob Preus: the controversy is coming to an end. For that, all Lutherans should be grateful. All in all, the moderates fought a magnificent fight. No one will ever be able to record the amount they suffered and sacrificed as no one will be able to calculate the price in personnel, program, ministry and money—not to mention morale and reputation—that the Missouri Synod has paid to secure its fanatical version of orthodoxy. The synod has been scarred and branded for years—generations—to come. As for the moderates, their only regret should be for brothers and sisters still trapped in the wreckage of old Missouri. As they now begin to leave, they will be comforted to know that in both the ALC and the LCA, they have brothers and sisters who are ready to receive them and help them live out the freedom of the Gospel, as I have discovered personally.

Shortly before his tragic death a few years ago, Kent Knutson stated that the period Lutheranism is passing through would determine whether its future would include a three or two-way merger of the major Lutheran bodies. Missouri has provided the answer. By the year 2000, if God still suffers it to exist, Lutheranism will be organized in two groups: ALC, LCA and the remnant of Missouri on the one side, the Missouri of the Preus legacy and the smaller conservative bodies such as Wisconsin on the other. That will not be at all bad. Moderates never wanted to accept the Missouri conservatives' cry for "realignment" since the word was a code for "purge." Nevertheless if you have ever been to a convention of the Missouri Synod and felt the unutterable longing of the conservatives to be rid of moderates' sight and sound, you would know it is for the best. Separation might even produce the change of climate no amount of moderate pleading was able to produce. (The English District convention recently is proof of this.) The more I think about it, the more I can see the possibility of new doors opening once the war is over.

All of that lies in the future. For the present it is sufficient to see once again that the God of history and the Lord of the Church sometimes does strange and terrible things in judgment with his people. Fellow Christians who view the Missouri Synod from the outside might well perceive that the way the Spirit leads is not always the way the charts and graphs and calculations of the wise predict. That in itself is both sobering and edifying. It serves to rebuke our pride and remind us who is in charge. Ultimately, in my view, the most important single lesson to emerge from Missouri's long ordeal is something less obvious: it is the mysterious power and activity of that holy thing called conscience.